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Ozu, Yasujirō (1903–1963)

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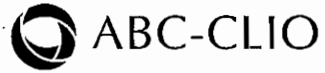

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Ozu, Yasujirō (1903–1963)

Yasujirō Ozu made a total of 54 films over his 35-year career (1927–1962), though it is generally his postwar films such as *Banshun* (*Late Spring*, 1949), *Bakushû* (*Early Summer*, 1951), *Tôkyô monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953), *Soshun* (*Early Spring*, 1956), and *Akibiyori* (*Late Autumn*, 1960) that have secured his reputation both within and outside of Japan. Of the big three directors of classic Japanese cinema (Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu), Ozu is the one most often lauded for his formal techniques and stylistic ingenuities; he is typically seen (especially by western scholars and critics) as the most quintessentially "Japanese" of filmmakers. In speaking of religious aspects of their respective oeuvres, the younger Kurosawa evokes a sustained if ironic humanism and Ozu's peer Mizoguchi a palpably Buddhist ideal of stoicism in the face of suffering and impermanence; however, Ozu's "religion" may be found less in the narrative content or general themes of his films than in their structure or esthetic form. Given this link to esthetics and formalism, critics tend to locate the religious roots of Ozu's work more specifically in the Zen tradition—the school of Buddhism that has played a significant if not determinative role in the shaping of modern Japanese esthetics. Although there is something to the connection between Zen and Ozu's filmmaking, it is a link that is frequently both overstated and unexplored, as critics—both Japanese and western—tend to fall into the easy trap of locating the ineffable "essence" of the "Japaneseness" within Ozu's "Zen" approach to the world.

Certainly, on the face of things there does not seem to be much overt religion in Ozu's works, the greatest of which are of the *shomin-geki* (working-class family drama) subgenre, set for the most part in a largely secular and urban postwar Japan. Two exceptions to this are the silent *Ukikusa monogatari* (*Story of Floating Weeds*, 1934)—with its frequent (often ironic) cutaway shots to both Shinto and Buddhist icons and artifacts—and the propagandistic *Chichi ariki* (*There Was a Father*, 1942)—which is rife with Buddhist imagery, used here in the service of

wartime ideology. In the classics of the late 1940s and 1950s, Buddhism plays a role as background scenery—the Great Buddha statue of Kamakura in *Early Summer* and the Kyoto temples of Kiyomizu-dera and Ryoanji (with its unparalleled Zen rock garden) in *Late Spring*. Although the case could be made that these images simply add a layer of realism to their respective stories, it is hard to ignore the fact that Ozu has chosen the most famous and perhaps stereotypical Buddhist locations in Japan—places known to each and every older Japanese as highlights of a common cultural heritage and in danger of being swamped by the pace and values of modern culture. Still, compared with the overt usage of religious themes in the great films of his rival Mizoguchi, Ozu avoids the intrusion of Buddhist doctrines or any religious ideas into his plots, which tend to be simple, if psychologically and emotionally acute, family dramas.

What exactly is the Zen formalism that critics see in Ozu's works? Simplicity of plot is an obvious root of the Zen theory, as is a conscious lack of high melodrama in favor of a concentration on seemingly mundane or trivial matters (once again, in stark contrast to Mizoguchi). The pace of Ozu's films is slow and the takes are long, even in the postwar "talkies," where many techniques of the silent era continue to frame Ozu's direction. Cuts between scenes become "still lifes," lingering on ordinary household objects such as a vase or a stack of books perched on a chair suddenly slipping to the ground. Zooms and pans are nonexistent, and Ozu's famously low camera makes for a somewhat unique perspective, though the reasons behind this are still debated. The acting also takes on a formalism that verges on ritualized performance—Ozu was known to have his actors repeat scenes dozens of times to produce this effect. In addition, speakers are often positioned in ways that appear unnatural, evoking surprise and even irritation in the viewer used to the standard codes of cinematic placement.

Much of this has been attributed to a Zen appreciation of emptiness, simplicity, and the beauty of the quotidian, though it may be just as easily taken as the director's attempt to push the limits of cinema by flaunting its artificiality as a medium. Filmmaker and critic Yoshida Kiju has labeled Ozu's later work as a form of "anticinema"—"a theology of motion pictures" that calls into question the very basis of the cinematic artifice by alternatively taking in the world "as it is" and at the same time stretching the limits of that artifice via the intrusion of form (or the camera) into the narrative. It should be noted that Ozu's headstone, located on the grounds of the Zen temple Engakuji in Kamakura, contains a single character *mu*—the traditional Zen term for nothingness and the answer to a famous Zen koan (a riddle intended to provoke instant awakening).

Japanese critics in general have been less inclined to read Ozu's films in terms of traditional Japanese esthetics, whether based in Zen or the (Shinto) *mono no aware*. There is, they correctly note, a manifest hybridity and dynamism in Ozu's

films—and an appreciation for human psychology—which includes but ultimately extends far beyond these traditional religious categories. Given both Ozu's lifelong love for early western cinema and his attempt to reconcile traditional Japan with the changing mores of the postwar period (as in *Late Spring*), this should hardly be surprising.

Considered by most to be Ozu's magnum opus, *Tokyo Story* is frequently taken as a locus for interpretation of his oeuvre. Typical of all his later works, the story is simple: an elderly couple in postwar Japan departs for Tokyo to visit their children but are met with coldness and irritation. Only their widowed daughter-in-law (played by Ozu's muse, the "eternal virgin" Setsuko Hara), an outsider to the main family group, is willing to care for them. Every action, every gaze, every simple conversation seems rife with meaning, though the meaning cannot be found in anything other than the action, gaze, or words themselves. Here as elsewhere, Ozu's films require a "suspension of belief"—a willingness to give up on a meaning beyond what appears; a refusal of transcendence. In contrast to the often heavy symbolism one finds in Mizoguchi, objects and vistas stand for themselves and often seem to be displayed from the perspective of the viewer (or the camera) rather than that of the characters in the story. The conclusion of the film, where the old man comes to terms with the death of his wife and the loneliness of having to be separate (physically and emotionally) from his children, appears to be a straightforward gloss on the Buddhist teaching of impermanence, yet the fact that the final scene so closely mirrors the opening one also indicates an even more basic theme of Ozu's films: repetition and recurrence amid change.

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See also: Buddhism; Japan; Kurosawa, Akira; Miyazaki, Hayao; Mizoguchi, Kenji; Schrader, Paul.

Further Reading

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